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Anger and Creativity

Can provoking anger stimulate creative thinking?

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Are angry people more creative? Can becoming angry make you creative? While, the former question relates to the role one's temperament plays in [creativity](#), the latter relates to a causal relation and asks: Can provoking [anger](#) stimulate creativity?

Van Kleef, Anastasopoulou, and Nijstadt (2010) argued that receiving angry feedback from an evaluator could increase "a focal person's [motivation](#) to perform well" (p.1043) on an idea generation task. They asserted that angry feedback increases task engagement leading to an increased production of ideas, which in turn increases the likelihood of generating a good idea, an expectation consistent with Osborn's principle of "quantity breeds quality" (Van Kleef et al., 2010, p. 1043). However, they hypothesized that angry feedback is more likely to be effective with individual's high, rather than low,

on epistemic motivation. Such individuals take angry feedback as an indication of suboptimal performance and a need to work harder on the task. When not performing well, the highs, as opposed to lows, are more intrinsically inclined to look for diagnostic information and make efforts to understand the situation accurately. The highs are less likely to employ stereotypical [heuristics](#) and to reject divergent information in problem solving.

Van Kleef et al. found evidence to support their hypothesis that the performance of highs on an idea generation task improved after receiving angry feedback; they not only produced more ideas, but more distinct and unique ideas. The highs spent greater time on task and were more engaged in task than the lows. Van Kleef et al. concluded that angry feedback might be helpful when employees are “held accountable for their performance” (p. 1046).

A more recent study by Bass, Dreu, and Nijstad (2011) took a different approach in examining the effect of increasing anger or sadness on creativity. They asked participants to write a short essay recalling an episode that made them angry or sad before taking a test of creativity. Thus, in Van Kleef et al.’s study, the expressed angry feedback was specific to task, but in Bass et al.’s study, the aroused anger was not specific to the task participants engaged in afterwards—students simply recalled a past episode that made them angry.

Reviewing literature, Bass et al. noted that some reputable scientists and artists were angry people and that some great scientific discoveries have stemmed from intense rivalries between “competing laboratories, with their academic directors driven by distrust, anger and frustration” (p. 1107). In contrast to Van Kleef et al.’s observation that anger worked for participants scoring high on epistemic motivation by stimulating greater task engagement and persistence, Bass et al. argued that an angry, compared with a sad or mood-neutral, person, tends to be more distractible and less systematic or structured in approach. The angry person tends to switch from one thought category to another, thereby activating remote concepts stored in [memory](#), and, consequently, thinking divergently. In contrast, sad affect is likely to create a need for structure, attending to detail, and step-by-step analytical or convergent approach to problem solving, thereby reducing access to “remote concepts in working memory” (p. 1108).

Bass et al. did three experiments and found, as they had expected, that anger, relative to sadness and mood-neutral affect, was associated with a less structured approach to idea generation and enhanced creativity early on, but

its effects declined over time. They explained that anger has an immediate energizing effect enhancing creativity, but because of fatigue this energy dissipates rapidly causing a decline in performance over time. They, however, noted an alternative possible explanation that anger may be more short-lived than sad mood, thus its energizing effects may also be short lived.

These studies, as interesting and well executed as they are, raise some important questions about using angry feedback and increasing non task-specific feelings of anger in work situations. Understandably, increased feelings of anger in some situations can lead to greater task engagement or divergent thinking, but are there not better, more civil ways of fostering creativity in people than increasing their feelings of unspecific anger or giving them angry feedback? Do we want more angry people at work? At least, Bass et al.'s study showed that the effects of anger are short-lived; therefore, it would make sense not to arouse anger for sustained creative efforts. However, is it appropriate to arouse anger to produce immediate creativity enhancing effects?

Anger is a normal human emotion and people do get angry, but can anger have dramatic negative effects? Expressions of anger at employees can trigger strong negative reactions possibly leading to withdrawal, grievances, and even workplace violent behavior. *Atharva Veda*, an ancient Indian scripture, describes anger as one of six psychological foes along with lust, greed, delusion, arrogance, and [jealousy](#). Seligman (1994) observed "People who often get angry use up their allotted [heart] beats faster" (p. 125). He also observed

Anger galvanizes some people into clever repartee and resourceful argument—they become masters of the "last word." For most of us anger is a very disorganizing emotion. We fume and we sputter. We forget our most important points. (p. 127)

The studies discussed here were conducted within a university setting using paid student volunteers who were aware that they were participating in an experiment. In a university experiment, student volunteers may be more willing to put up with angry feedback than employees. Should we administer a questionnaire on epistemic motivation to all employees and then decide whom we can get angry at to motivate creativity? Should the employees sign an informed consent form at the time of hiring that managers can give angry feedback as needed with a certain type of people? Should there be a course on anger enhancement for creativity?

Angry feelings may be taxing to the experiencer and angry feedback may be taxing to both givers and receivers. Workplaces demand civility from managers and employees, and would it not be better to find ways of providing creativity enhancing feedback in a civil manner?

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